Yeats's reasons for keeping silent

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In the year 1915 on being asked by Henry James to write some verses for *The Book of the Homeless*, a war charity volume edited by Edith Wharton, Yeats wrote a poem stating that he would not write a war poem. It was a collection of basically patriotic poems and prose, including illustrations and music scores, contributed by numerous famous writers and artists, the aim of which was to raise funds for the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee which Wharton founded in Paris. 'A Reason for Keeping Silent' is the original version of the poem sent to Edith Wharton, which Yeats quoted in a letter to Henry James dated August 20, 1915.

A Reason for keeping silent
I think it better that at times like these
We poets keep our mouths shut; for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He's had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

A slightly different version in the *Collected Edition* is more familiar to us.

On Being Asked for a War Poem

I think it better that in times like these
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

The title is altered, and the first two lines, which were colloquial, as if he had imitated War Poets, are changed into more literary style, but in both versions we cannot help feeling that Yeats is deliberately evasive.

Yeats's reason for keeping silent seems, in one respect, to be a political one. His seemingly indifferent attitude toward blood sacrifice partly comes from his belief that the Great War was not an Irish war. At the same time, he tried to be non-committal to both John Redmond' s recruiting side and Patrick Pearse's pro-German stance.

There seem to be some other reasons why Yeats kept silent or pretended to be silent about the Great War. The fact is that he did write about it in four elegies dedicated to Robert Gregory, one of which is a well-known anthology piece 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death' written in 1918. Besides, contrary to Yeats's statement that 'we poets keep our mouths shut; for in truth / We have no gift to set a statesman right', he meddled with the brutalities and upheavals of Ireland like the Easter Rising and the Civil War and immediately wrote several agonized poems on them, though the Easter Rising pieces('Easter, 1916', 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'The Rose Tree') were privately printed and published some time after.

These facts make me think about Yeats's complex reactions to warfare. Superficially, we may say that Yeats reacted only to Irish suffering,

but this is a too simplified generalization. In this paper I am going to examine, first, Yeats's personal reasons for this seemingly disingenuous attitude and then, in the second half, I will put him in a broader Modernist perspective, concentrating on his affinity with Modernists.

* * *

It is true that Yeats had some reservations about the First World War and War Poets. Consider his notorious expulsion of Wilfred Owen's poems from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* on the grounds that 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry', which is written in the 'Introduction' .

> I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war: they are in all anthologies, but I have substituted Herbert Read's *End of a War* written long after. The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity, one a man constantly selected for dangerous work, all, I think, had the Military Cross; their letters are vivid and humorous, they were not without joy—for all skill is joyful — but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced. When man has withdrawn into the quicksilver at the back of the mirror no great event becomes luminous in his

> mind; it is no longer possible to write *The Persians, Agincourt, Chevy Chase*: some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road — that is all.
>
> If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease. 〔……〕

Though he did not mention Owen's name here, it was clear that he had Owen in mind when he wrote this Introduction, written 20 years after his refusal to write a war poem. As was expected, the exclusion of Owen initiated vigorous protests from many critics and Yeats poured diatribe against Owen in his letter to Dorothy Wellesley as often as three times. The volume sold well in spite of those attacks, Yeats did not make any public apology, working off his personal grudge in those letters. One of them, dated Dec. 21, 1936 runs like this:

> My anthology continues to sell, and the critics get more and more angry. When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum — however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick(look at the selection in *Faber's Anthology* — he calls poets 'bards,' a girl 'a maid,' and talks about 'Titanic wars'). There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him.

His theory of 'passive suffering' in the Introduction was the first and last public statement he ever made against Owen.

Joseph Cohen presumes from Yeats's letter to Wellsley that the reason for the expulsion was that Yeats saw, reflected in Owen' s juvenilia, something of himself, some of his own diction, which irritated him. This cannot be the only reason why Yeats had 'a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war'. He included Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brook, Siegfried Sassoon and other war poets, but none of them representing typical war poems written during the war. The only exception is Julian Grenfell's 'Into Battle' (1915) written 'in the midst of the great war' :

[……]
And when the burning moment breaks,
And all things else are out of mind,
And only *joy of battle* takes
Him by the throat, and makes him blind,

Through joy or blindness he shall know,
Not caring much to know, that still
Nor lead nor steel shall reach him, so
That it be not the Destined Will.
[……] [italics mine]

This poem lauds 'joy of battle', to which Yeats was attracted. It can be concluded with Cohen that, for war poetry, the only acceptable theme, the only valid military theme to Yeats, is 'the ancient, Romantic, exultant glorification by the combatant of his strength in arms and his

willingness to sacrifice all, whatever the cause'. I found in the volume another example of his valid theme in Herbert Read's *End of a War* , which conveyed 'ecstasy of battle' felt by a German officer, but this poem was written long after the war, and quite different from war poems, rather Modernist in structure. Taking these facts into account, Yeats' s animosity to war poetry is not only a personal offense against Owen, but deep rooted in the belief of his poetic principle and his view of life and death, on which I will later elaborate.

Earlier than the expulsion of Owen in 1936 there was a famous controversy between Yeats and Seán O'Casey when Yeats refused to present O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie* at the Abbey in 1928. This is another example implying his conviction. O'Casey exposed the brutalities and calamities of the Great War, on which Yeats heaped cutting criticisms in his letter to O'Casey, dated April 20, 1928.

> [.....] you are not interested in the Great War; you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals, and so write out of your opinions. You illustrate those opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes as you might in a leading article; there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action, and your great power of the past has been the creation of some unique character who dominated all about him and was himself a main impulse in some action that filled the play from beginning to end. The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background, and obtrudes itself upon the stage as so much dead wood that will not burn with the dramatic fire.

That there is 'no dominating character, no dominating action', partly

explains his reason for attacking the play; he finds in the play only 'passive suffering' and no 'joy of battle'. Part of this is of course the nature of the Great War, but Yeats harbored anachronistic, chivalric views on mass war. Or they might derive from Celtic military spirit.

Yeats is not, however, constant in his belief, because he also wrote war poems about 'passive suffering' when confronted with Irish turbulances; a typical one is 'Reprisals'. This poem, also dedicated to Robert Gregory, was written at the end of 1920, but Yeats refrained from publishing it at Lady Gregory's request until 1948.

Reprisals

Some nineteen German planes, they say,
You had brought down before you died.
We called it a good death. Today
Can ghost or man be satisfied?
Although your last exciting year
Outweighed all other years, you said,
Though *battle joy* may be so dear
A memory, even to the dead,
It chases other thought away,
Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
Flit to Kiltartan Cross and stay
Till certain second thoughts have come
Upon the cause you served, that we
Imagined such a fine affair :
Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
Are murdering your tenants there.
Men that revere your father yet

Are shot at on the open plain.
Where may new-married women sit
And suckle children now? Armed men
May murder them in passing by
Nor law nor parliament take heed.
Then close your ears with dust and lie
Among the other cheated dead. [italics mine]

In this poem is an expression of 'battle joy', which is a dear memory to the dead airman, but the latter part of the poem represents 'passive suffering' of Irish people caused by the reprisals of Black and Tans. The poem shows his somewhat different attitude towards atrocities; he must have noticed that the glorification of war was no longer applicable to modern warfare, as he tried to find it in Gregory's death. To Yeats, the flying experience was far from being the summit of modern technology, as some Modernists felt, but the only way to recover the glory of heroic death from filthy, muddy trench poetry. It also gave vent to the pilot's sublime view of life and death.

This view is consistent with Yeats' s ideal of the heroic equestrian figure who 'cast[s] a cold eye / On life, on death' of 'Under Ben Bulben.' In his later years Yeats sympathetically put on stage Cuchulain and King Lear who gave a cold, indifferent glance to death. The frequently used expression 'tragic joy' concerning these figures is what, Yeats found, is lacking in war poetry. The only military theme that has validity for Yeats, the ancient exultant commemoration of the warriors' willingness to sacrifice all, comes from his own sublime view of life and death.

* * *

In the latter part of this paper I should like to concentrate on, what I believe is, Yeats's Modernist aspect, in connection with the Great War. There are many ways of defining Modernism, and none of them is enough to grasp this elusive concept, as is always the case with –isms. Generally speaking, Modernism has to do with something modern, artistic innovation, objections against existing forms of representation and social norms, and specifically it refers to the culture of the first few decades of the 20th century when urbanization, industrialization, the development of science, mass production and mass consumption came to a peak. Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Vorticism, Dadaism, Surrealism are all would-be modernisms, but what is common with those modernisms is hard to tell. What is new, what is anti-traditional varies, and all we can say is that modern artists, intrigued by the spirit of making it new, sought for some change, not the observation of classical norms.

In my opinion, Modernism cannot be separated from the First World War. Of course this is not the case with Japan; we also had our own Modernism in the first quarter of the 20th century. It was mainly from the influence of Western cultures imported and disseminated after Japan opened its door to the world in the latter half of the 19th century. We had Modern Boy, Modern Girl and 'haikara', a slang at that time, coming from 'high-collar, which meant 'fashionable'. Putting Japan aside, what links Modernism with the First World War is simply the masses and the numbers.

Let me first point out the importance of the urban masses to the Modernists. Those socialists of the crowd like Gustave Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset observed that the emergence of the masses was a

modern phenomenon. In the 19th century, which saw an unprecedented explosion of the population in Europe, the masses, coming to the scene from the backstage, went shopping at department stores, had bicycles and cars, and made train journeys. They enjoyed the new media like photographs, radios and cinemas. The range of entertainment they could afford extended tremendously, but of course the Victorian slums in which people huddled remained; the problem of poverty was always present in urban culture. In the 17th century, according to Michel Foucault, statistics was born, which connected the art of governing the state with knowledge comprising both collection and analysis of numerical data on the state. In the succeeding centuries, those data were becoming too extensive to deal with.

The Modernists, beginning with Baudelaire, were the first artists who were dazzled, repelled and sometimes enchanted by the masses. Perhaps the word 'shock' best explains their complex reactions. Crowds on the streets shocked Modernists as savages, automatons, symbols of corruption or isolated beings. Yeats was never charmed by the crowds in the city; he longed for Sligo even in the midst of London, Romantic Ireland dead and gone, and the equestrian hero of Ben Bulben. His repulsion for the masses was his way of expressing the shock he experienced. Elitist Modernists, overwhelmed by the outburst of the masses, were dismayed at how to distance themselves, for an increase in quantity accompanied a decrease in quality, but they were at the same time attracted by mass culture.

The crowds on the streets are reflected in the soldiers on the battlefields. Let me remind you of the impressive picture inserted in Paul Fussel' s classic study *The Great War and Modern Memory*(1975), in which are thronged together innocent young men wearing similar bowler hats

and dark suits at the Central London Recruiting Depot. Who knows how many of them survived.

As they look alike in the picture, so is the death in the battlefields, which does not make any distinction. Owen says in 'Insensibility' 'Men, [are] gaps for filling: / Losses, who might have fought / Longer.' There were many soldiers and officers who were shell-*shocked*. Even after the war we observe in public cemeteries thousands of rectangular tombs lined up geometrically and mass commemorations there. Enormous numbers of casualties and also of statistics are the products of both modern times and the Great War.

Gertrude Stein' s essay on Picasso(1938), quoted below, found a Cubist war in the First World War where there were no heroes nor centres.

> Really the composition of this war, 1914-18, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.

Cubist disruption and dislocation, which made this war incomparable to any other previous war, dispelled 19th century borders of classes and nations. Having no central principles it already anticipated Post-Modernism. Those young men of August 1914, who believed in the advent of something worth risking their lives, were betrayed by 'old men', 'old lies', and by this composition of modern warfare which had already Post-Modern elements within. Or we might say in Professor Carpenter's

terms(Andrew Carpenter's Keynote Lecture on 17th century Irish war poetry at the conference) that it became difficult to see and play with the funny side of war.

The mass death of the Great War is a negative picture of the mass living before the war. Margot Norris suggests that from the historical point of view the Victorian proletariat were transported to the battlefields of the Great War and that the filthy, stinking trenches were starkly reminiscent of the Victorian slums of factory workers. The shock of numbers both in the mass living and mass death is characteristic of Modernists, and Yeats is no exception.

I may be speaking too generally and in the abstract, but let me point out one typical Modernist poem by T.S.Eliot, 'Triumphal March' , which is not so popular, well testifies to the change of meaning the numerals imply.

Stone, bronze, stone, steel, stone, oakleaves, horses' heels
Over the paving.
And the flags. And the trumpets. And so many eagles.
How many? Count them. And such a press of people.
We hardly knew ourselves that day, or knew the City.
This is the way to the temple, and we so many crowding the way.
So many waiting, how many waiting? What did it matter, on such a day?
Are they coming? No, not yet. You can see some eagles.
And hear the trumpets.
Here they come. Is he coming?
The natural wakeful life of our Ego is a perceiving.
We can wait with our stools and our sausages.

What comes first? Tell us. Can you see? It is

5,800,000 rifles and carbines,
102,000 machine guns,
28,000 trench mortars,
53,000 field and heavy guns,
I cannot tell how many projectiles, mines and fuses,
13,000 aeroplanes,
24,000 aeroplane engines,
50,000 ammunition waggons,
Now 55,000 army waggons,
11,000 field kitchens,
1,150 field bakeries.
[……]

In this poem the masses are described waiting for the triumphant return of a hero attended by numerous arms and weapons. The location is deliberately blurred; it looks like ancient Rome and also like London or Paris after the war. Thus the fundamental sameness of ancient and modern wars are emphasized, and so is the immortality of the ignorant masses who accept only 'bread and circus'. Enumeration of the nouns and numerals here are no longer ritualistic repetitions of the Bible, nor obsession to the numerical data found in Daniel Defoe; they are simply caricatures. Modern statistics and bookkeeping were dedicated to sort out and put in order the overflow of numerals, but in the 20th century numerals completely became the objects of satire.

The Industrial Revolution which gave people the shocks of numbers still suppress their negative aspects and could be the symbols of

prosperity, progress and innovation. Tennyson's famous poem on the Crimean War, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' , still cherished glory and honour. World War I, however, totally stripped off the glory from the enumeration of numbers.

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This is a slightly altered and extended version of the paper presented at the Fifth Annual Irish Conference, focusing on 'Ireland: At War and Peace' , held at the University of Sunderland, UK, on 9-11 November, 2007.

My thanks go to Tim Armstrong and Terry O'Brien for their linguistic advice and comments. I would also like to thank the organizers of the conference who gave me this opportunity and participants who gave me comments.

Some parts of the paper were previously published in Japanese and the book-length study on the First World War and Modernism, including the idea developed here, will come out this spring.